

## V. Students and Teachers

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An elementary school foreign language teacher in an upstate county uses St. Patrick's Day as an occasion to teach French vocabulary. She asks her students—speaking French throughout the lesson—what color they're wearing today. "Vert," they answer. And what specific articles of clothing are "vert" today? "Mes chaussettes" is one reply.

This seemingly simple activity incorporates various strategies. The teacher has emphasized conversational communication; she has made the students an active part of the lesson; she has also made learning a language interesting. This is the way languages should be taught today.

### A cognitive approach

At the beginning stage of learning, today's modern foreign language teachers emphasize the ability to understand and to be understood more than the ability to manipulate grammatical structures. They rely less on repetitive drills and more on activities designed to simulate real-life situations. However, teachers of classical languages continue to emphasize grammar and pronunciation as a means of communication and comparison with other cultures.

Today's foreign language students are producers of real language, not just repeaters of artificial dialogues out of textbooks. They are active participants in a two-way street of communication, not simply memorizers of vocabulary and grammar rules.

Language education is currently based on cognitive psychology, which views the mind as a creative, dynamic agent of learning. The student is an active participant in the learning process rather than a sponge soaking up information and responding to stimuli. According to cognitive theory, individuals control and are responsible for their own learning. Learning is an internal process, not an external force.

### Meaningful learning

"Learning should always be *meaningful*; that is, students should understand at all times what they are being asked to do. New material should always be organized so that it is relatable to students' existing cognitive structure. Since not all students learn in the same way, the teacher should appeal to all senses and learning styles."

Alice C. Omaggio, *Teaching Language in Context*, 67.

### Culture via the Internet

"Today's online technologies afford opportunities for enhancing student access to up-to-date and even up-to-the-minute cultural materials and realia. The use of these online authentic materials can help provide students with a level of cultural awareness most often acquired only through experience abroad. In addition, communicative activities provide engaging opportunities for students to acquire the target language."

Michael D. Bush and Robert M. Terry, eds., *Technology-Enhanced Language Learning*, 216.

Foreign language teachers have moved from treating knowledge of a foreign language as an end in itself to treating the language as a means to a more significant end: communication. Emphasis has changed from what students *know* about a language to what they can actually *do* with a language. As a result, important developments have occurred in recent years in foreign language classrooms, where now we find

- student-centered instruction, where students have more opportunities to speak and to initiate conversation;
- more opportunities for cooperative learning and less reliance on competition;
- more emphasis on effective communication and less on error-correction ;
- more use of authentic cultural materials (e.g., restaurant menus, newspapers, Web sites, television programs) as springboards for communication in the language and less separation of the study of culture from language production;
- the use of interweaving, spiraling, and recycling to reinforce what is taught and to meet the needs of students with different learning styles; and
- the use of an interdisciplinary approach in which foreign language instruction connects with instruction in other subject areas.

Here is an example of a communication-based lesson in action. A student leaves the classroom. While the student is gone, something in the classroom is hidden from view. The student returns and follows the directions of classmates in order to find the missing object. The student cannot do anything without first being told to do so by classmates. All talking among students, of course, is done in the foreign language.

This activity exemplifies effective communication.

### **The role of grammar**

Although the word *grammar* does not appear in the standards for foreign language learning, its absence does not imply that grammar study is no longer important. In a standards-driven curriculum, grammar plays a supporting role rather than the leading one. When we

### **Cooperative learning**

At Lexington High School, French students work in groups of four or five to create and produce—often on videotape— original news broadcasts, complete with news reports, commercials, and weather forecasts in French. This project requires some knowledge of current events, a certain amount of creativity, and a good deal of cooperation.

### **Standards in the classroom**

“Ensuring that students are able to meet national standards does not mean abandoning successful instructional programs and practices. It does require, however, a careful examination of the instructional program to ensure that it is both comprehensive and standards-based. The result of this examination may mean complementing or supplementing what is already in place. It may also mean that program content that is less essential, from a standards-based perspective, may need to be discarded in order to allow for the introduction of new materials and learning experiences.”

*Bringing the Standards into the Classroom*, 25.

are dealing with classical languages, grammar study is essential and must be addressed.

In the teaching of foreign languages, grammatical accuracy is viewed as a process rather than an event. When provided with exposure to a great deal of comprehensible language, students develop accuracy gradually, as children do in their native language.

Making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. As students develop proficiency in a language, they begin to ask specific questions about grammar. Teachers can take advantage of these occasions to enhance their students' accuracy.

### **Different ways to learn**

As theories about the teaching of foreign languages have evolved over the years, so have opinions about how students learn. Research has shown that when confronted with learning another language, students exhibit a variety of individual learning styles and strategies.

For example, some students are more visual learners than others, some are more auditory, and still others are more kinesthetic. Foreign language teachers must take these differences into account when planning classroom activities. They cannot expect to teach all of their students the same way, because not all students learn the same way.

Teachers must go beyond general educational theories and delve more deeply into the matter of individual learning styles and strategies if they want to maximize their effectiveness as educators. They must realize that student learning styles run the gamut from the analytical to the holistic approach. Additionally, teachers must gear their instruction strategies to accommodate various student personalities.

Not only must teachers recognize that their students use different learning strategies; they must also help their students select and implement the most appropriate strategies for specific language-learning tasks. For example, teachers can instruct students to use nonverbal clues to meaning when listening to narrations or dialogues, to group like words together when learning vocabulary, and to identify all familiar words first when scanning written material. In short, teachers must teach the language while at the same time helping each student discover the most efficient ways for him or her, as an individual, to learn the language.

#### **Student involvement**

"...instruction should not be based on only the material at hand but should lead the student to other sources and formats of information. One source of information cannot possibly provide in-depth coverage of a subject without encouraging the student to seek information elsewhere. The material being examined should require that students be *active* constructors of knowledge, not passive recipients of information."

"South Carolina Criteria for Adoption of Instructional Materials," 22.

This is not to say that teachers must design personalized lesson plans for all of the one hundred fifty or so students they teach each school day. But teachers must develop multiple approaches to be used in varying combinations if they hope to be effective with all of their students. It is the teacher's responsibility to become aware of students' different learning styles and the different strategies they use in conjunction with those styles and then to determine how students can make the most appropriate match between the two.

### The astute teacher

No single model exists for an effective standards-driven program. Many foreign language professionals advocate the use of elements from several models based on a sound knowledge of second-language acquisition and instruction.

An eclectic approach allows both for individual teaching styles and for individual learning styles. Some guidelines do exist, however, for the effective foreign language classroom, where the main goal is to help each student develop into an individual who exercises fluency, flexibility, and originality with language. Such guidelines include the following recommendations for teachers:

- Create a secure environment that fosters risk-taking and “can do” attitudes. As Bette Hirsch writes in *Languages of Thought*, “Teachers now value the student who will risk generating a novel sentence as much as the student who has a keen sense of grammatical patterns” (8).
- Focus on communicative ability more than technical correctness. Congratulate a student for getting a message across to the rest of the class, even if that message includes grammar or punctuation mistakes.
- Expose students to topics that trigger their interests and then relate those interests to other cultures. High school students, for example, can practice language while discussing dating practices in another country. Career-related topics are also good.
- Take into consideration students' readiness in their native language. Use age-appropriate materials at each level of instruction.

### Cultural appropriateness

“Part of learning a new language is learning to recognize differences in world views, customs, beliefs, and social conventions. If a speaker wants to express a certain emotion in a [foreign] language—a sense of urgency, anger, impatience, deference, or authority, for example—in what manner can the emotion be expressed? Which voice modulations, facial expressions, and gestures would be culturally appropriate? Students need to learn that cultures are often quite different but that they all have values. The language cannot be separated from the culture that gives it life.”

*Foreign Language Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve, 8.*

- Use a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate the variety of learning styles and strategies among students. For example, have students hold and smell a fruit while learning its name in the target language. This will enable the students to remember the new word more easily.
- Use a combination of individual, pair, small-group, and class activities, all in the target language:
  - Let the students, speaking individually, tell the class what they did over the weekend.
  - Have students, working in pairs, interview each other about a topic of interest.
  - Assign each student in a small group to describe a picture while the others draw what is described.
  - Have a group of students work together to use the Internet in planning a visit to a foreign destination and then have them present their findings to the class.
  - Assign the entire class to listen to audio tapes or watch videos and then to discuss the similarities and differences among the cultures featured in these media.
- Use technology freely to enhance classroom instruction. Students need to hear foreign languages spoken by native speakers at normal speed and to read the languages in authentic contexts. Foreign language teachers should work closely with their schools to access authentic foreign language materials.
- Encourage student effort with positive reinforcement.

### **Incorporation of goals and standards**

A well-rounded foreign language program reflects the goals and standards cited in chapter IV of this document. Such a program also takes into account the various learning styles and strategies mentioned earlier in this chapter. Teachers provide students many opportunities to communicate in languages other than English, to gain knowledge of other cultures, to connect with other disciplines, to develop insight into the nature of language, and to participate in multilingual communities. In fact, many teachers around the country are already doing these things. Sample lessons are found in the section called “Learning Scenarios” in *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* (67–94).

How can individual teachers use these resources in their own planning? First, they can keep in mind the above-mentioned goals and standards while taking the daily steps toward meeting them. Second, they can evaluate what is being done already to support the goals and standards and keep those activities alive. Finally, they can look for ways to progress toward those goals and the supporting standards with each activity. Lasting change comes in small increments.